

## Lent 5C 2016 Sermon

### *John 12:1-8*

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Last Sunday we heard the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and we noted how sympathetic we Americans are toward the older son. It isn't fair that his renegade younger brother gets a feast thrown for him while the older brother, who has been obedient to his father and worked hard his whole life, has *never* had a feast thrown for him! Whatever happened to having a strong work ethic? Whatever happened to being rewarded for your efforts? We noted the tendency we Americans have to look at things from a material point of view, and from that perspective, the overwhelming grace and forgiveness of God (demonstrated by the Prodigal Father) seems unfair. We fail to see *behind* the values of **this** world to the values of the Kingdom of God – the values of overwhelming mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

In today's Gospel, a similar problem arises. From the point of view of her culture's standards, everything that Mary does is wrong. She lets down her hair and dares to touch a man in public – and in such a sensuous way! And then she *wastes* a whole **pound** of perfume which was worth 300 days' wages by pouring it on Jesus' feet! If we stay in our material, worldly mindset, what Mary does is both socially scandalous and carelessly wasteful! We find ourselves sympathizing with Judas' argument that the perfume could have been sold and the money used to support a poor family for 300 days!

But in John's Gospel, if we stay on the level of the material world, very little will make sense. We must go deeper into the spiritual truths that are so strongly operative beneath the material surface.

Today, we have arrived in our lectionary at the doorstep of Jesus' passion. Our Gospel story takes place in Bethany, which is less than two miles outside Jerusalem, where Jesus will shortly be crucified. John sets the scene: "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." John clearly wants us to link today's story of Mary

anointing Jesus' feet with the death and resuscitation of Lazarus – the story which happens just previous to today's story. (John 11:1-44) *That* event – the raising of Lazarus from the dead – was the **last** of the seven signs in John's Gospel which revealed who Jesus truly was. The *first* sign, you will remember, occurred way back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. (John 2:1-11) The scene was *another* meal, that time a wedding banquet. And *another* Mary, Jesus' mother, had noticed that the host of the banquet had run out of wine, and she had brought that fact to Jesus' attention. Jesus replied, "My hour has not yet come." Nevertheless, Jesus acted, turning 180 gallons of water into the finest wine. A superabundance of the finest wine! In my sermon on that passage back in January, I noted that **first** things matter, for they set the pattern for all that is to come. In his **first** sign, Jesus provided far more of the finest wine than could ever be used by the wedding guests, because that's what God's superabundant love and grace looks like. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

In *today's* story, which we have seen is strongly linked to the **last** sign in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus, the theme of superabundance is repeated. This time, *another* Mary is involved, and this time, it is SHE who provides the overabundance. Mary of Bethany had taken to heart the signs throughout Jesus' ministry of the superabundance of God's love and grace and had responded from that space of love and grace in her own heart. And whereas at the scene of Jesus' **first** sign Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come," in today's Gospel story, immediately following and tied to his **last** sign, Jesus' hour is at hand. (See John 12:23) And the question John wants us to ask is: "What is the meaning of the arrival of Jesus' hour?"

Today's story takes place at a dinner given for Jesus at Lazarus' home. The grievous memory of Lazarus' death is still fresh in the minds of everyone, as well as the unspeakable joy in his return to life, which revealed that God's love and life are stronger than death! John sees the death and raising of Lazarus as pointing to the arrival of Jesus' hour – Jesus' **own** death and resurrection, when Jesus will extravagantly pour out the whole of his life for the sake of the world, and triumph over death.

In anointing Jesus' feet, Mary *anticipates* this total outpouring of Jesus' self in love in an act which, on the material surface, is both scandalous and wasteful in the extreme.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, women were not to speak to men or touch men in public. They were not to let down their hair in public. (To this day in many Middle Eastern cultures women cover their hair with scarves or hijabs, since a woman's hair is thought to be too sensual.) And yet, as author Rachel Held Evans writes, "Mary dares to cradle the feet of Jesus in her hands and spread the oil across his ankles and toes with the ends of her hair."<sup>1</sup> And she pours the whole **pound** of perfume on Jesus' feet, holding nothing of herself back. She pours herself out totally in love for Jesus, imitating the total outpouring of Jesus'

own life for her and for the world in his impending hour. Fr. Thomas Keating notes that Mary “identifies with [Jesus] to such an intimate degree that she manifests the same disposition of total self-giving that **he** is about to manifest on the cross. She had learned from Jesus how to throw herself away and become like God” in her total self-offering.<sup>2</sup> And in this act of washing Jesus’ feet, Mary also anticipates Jesus’ washing of his disciples feet on the eve of his death – a profound symbol of both Jesus’ self-offering and his modeling of servanthood to all of us. (John 13:1-19)

But in all of this analysis, this layer upon layer of symbols which is so typical of John’s Gospel, we are leaving out a central, crucial symbol of this story. It is not a symbol grasped with our minds, but with our senses: the **fragrance** of the perfume! We have already noted that this story is closely linked to the story of Lazarus’ death and resuscitation. In that story, Mary’s sister Martha had mentioned the **stench** of death, since their brother Lazarus had been dead four days. John powerfully contrasts the **stench** of death with the overwhelming *fragrance* of a whole pound of the finest perfume which filled the house! This fragrance signifies Mary’s modeling, in her own self-giving, the precious gift of Jesus pouring out his life. We will see this powerfully represented later in John’s Gospel when, after Jesus dies on the cross, Nicodemus comes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus’ body down and anoint it. John tells us that Nicodemus brings with him “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” (19:39) A hundred pounds of fragrance! Remarking on this incredible amount of ointment, John Shea writes: “The excessive spices cover the odor of death with a larger and more powerful perfume. The scent that fills the home of Lazarus [in today’s story] also fills the tomb [in that later story].”<sup>3</sup> A whole pound of perfume after *Lazarus’* death becomes 100 pounds of fragrance after *Jesus’* death! Fr. Shea writes, “The death and burial of Jesus is a perfume that thrills and fills the entire house of those who serve and eat with him... [It is the perfume of Jesus’ pouring out of his life in love, which brings life from death.] When [Mary] wipes the feet of Jesus with her hair, it is not to clean them of excess perfume. It is to share in the abundance of [the fragrance]. It is to scent her hair with the love that flows from him.”<sup>4</sup>

And Mary bids us do the same. After her example and the example of Jesus, to wash one another’s feet. And after her example and the example of Jesus, to pour out our lives into God’s world in extravagant love. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God...manifests through us the sweet aroma of... [Christ]... For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among [all]...” (2 Cor. 2:14-15) And we are to fill the whole world with the totally self-giving perfume of God’s love. We are to “walk in love as Christ loved us, and gave himself, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2; *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 376)

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/women-of-the-passion-anoint-oil>

<sup>2</sup> S. Stephanie Iachetta, compiler, *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living, Excerpts from the Works of Father Thomas Keating*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 71)

<sup>3</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 103

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101