

## Lent 5C 2019 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."*

From the point of view of the cultural standards of the day, everything that Mary does in today's Gospel story is scandalous. 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 outrageous and unconscionably 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 almost a year! Figuring the equivalent amount of money at **today's** minimum wage, the cost of this perfume would amount to \$24,000. \$24,000.

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

Today, we arrive in our lectionary at the doorstep of Jesus' passion. Our Gospel story takes place in Bethany, less than two miles outside Jerusalem, where Jesus will soon 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 with the death and raising of Lazarus – which takes place 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 – signs which reveal who Jesus truly is. The *first* sign, you may 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 to his mother, "My hour has not yet come." Nevertheless, Jesus took action, turning 180 gallons of water into the finest wine – a superabundance. John tells us that 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 from the dead, this theme of superabundance is repeated. 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, which follows 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 this hour?"

Our story today takes place at a dinner given for Jesus at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. The grievous memory of Lazarus' death is still fresh in the minds of everyone, and so is the unspeakable joy in his return to life! Can you imagine sitting at table with a man who had been dead for four days and yet now was alive, eating and drinking at a meal? **Certainly** that unbelievable miracle was still fresh in everyone's stunned mind – how could it *not* be? And the Gospel-writer John wants us to see the death and raising of Lazarus as pointing to the arrival of Jesus' hour – Jesus' **own** death and resurrection.

John wants us to see that, in freely and lovingly pouring out a whole pound of expensive, fragrant oil on Jesus' feet, Mary *anticipates* the total outpouring of Jesus' life in love. So let's look a little closer at Mary's act.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, women were not to touch or speak to men in public. They were *definitely* not to let down their hair in public. (To this day in some traditional cultures or religions women cover their hair with scarves or hijabs, since a woman's hair is thought to be too sensual to display in public.) 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 effectively 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 his disciples, as well as to all of us. (John 13:1-19)

But in all of this analysis, this layer upon layer of deeply meaningful symbols which is so typical of John's Gospel, we often overlook one powerful symbol in this story. And we most likely overlook it because it is not a symbol grasped with our *minds*, but with our *senses*: and that is the **fragrance** of the perfume!

We have already noted that this story is closely linked to the story of Lazarus' death and Jesus raising him from the grave. In *that* story, Mary's sister Martha had mentioned the **stench** of death, since their brother Lazarus had been dead four days. In telling *today's* story, John powerfully contrasts the **stench** of death with the overpowering *fragrance* of a whole pound of the finest perfume, which **fills** the house! This overwhelming fragrance signifies that Mary, in her own total, self-giving love, is united with Jesus in the pouring out *his* life completely in love for the whole world (John 3:16).

We will see a similarly overpowering olfactory experience recounted *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 [of Jesus 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 [anticipated in Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet] 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.] 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 to do the same. After her example and the example of Jesus, **we** are to wash one another's feet. After her example and the example of Jesus, **we** are to pour out *our* lives into God's world in extravagant, fragrant 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 you and I are to fill the whole world with the totally self-giving perfume of God's love. We are to "walk in love as Christ loves us," and give ourselves, a **fragrant** offering to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2; *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 376)

AMEN

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

2 S. Stephanie Iachetta, compiler, *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living, Excerpts*

*from the Works of Father Thomas Keating*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 71)

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

4 *Ibid.*, p. 101