

Psalm 126
John 12:1-8

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 7, 2019

Anointing at Bethany

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

As one of the Songs of Ascents, our Psalm for this Fifth Sunday in Lent may well have been used by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem, to Zion. This is the Jerusalem which has had a special relationship with God, which had served God and failed God, where God's promises had been fulfilled and where they were still to be fulfilled. The psalm is a community lament that recalls a previous time of God's mercy and asks for a fresh show of that mercy. Listen to these words from Psalm 126...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

The scene of our Gospel Lesson is Bethany; the time is Passover, which in John's Gospel means death time. Lazarus hosts a dinner party for Jesus, the One who had just brought Lazarus back to life. Listen to these words from John 12:1-8...

Sermon

It's easy to recognize memories bound up in old photographs or the familiar melody of an old song. But our sense of smell is also closely tied to memory. A whiff turnip greens simmering on the stove or coffee perking can transport you to a place you'd forgotten. The smell of certain baked goods rising in the oven can bring you right back to a holiday when you were a child or to the presence of your grandmother. A perfume can evoke a lost memory of someone you haven't seen in years. When I was in high school, Aqua Velva was a popular aftershave lotion. I haven't smelled it in some 50 years, but if I were blindfolded and someone put an open bottle of that fragrance, along with several others, under my nose, I could easily identify it. And

the fragrance would bring back memories of life in high school. In our lesson in John 12, the smell of perfume fills the whole home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had recently resuscitated.

Imagine with me that we attended this dinner party in Bethany that we read about in John 12. Bethany was only about a mile and a half from Jerusalem. Today you can hear the Jerusalem traffic and see the city lights from this picturesque village overlooking the Mount of Olives. Among the guests mentioned in John's account of the dinner party were the two sisters, Mary and Martha. Also present is Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray Jesus. No doubt there were others, for John tells us that many Jews were beginning to follow Jesus, to believe in him, after he raised Lazarus from the dead. But none of these are named guests at this dinner on a Saturday evening, six days before Passover.

Now perhaps you can relate to Martha, especially you ladies. For Martha was always busy in the kitchen, making guests feel comfortable, sometimes getting a little irritated at her sister Mary, who would rather sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his word, than help in the kitchen. Martha complained to Jesus about this once, but Jesus told her that Mary had made a good decision. Perhaps that ended Martha's complaining about Mary's not helping—at least when Jesus was around. Martha was probably the perfect hostess this night, celebrating the joy of her brother Lazarus being brought back to life, and honoring Jesus by preparing a marvelous meal. Trying to take care of things, do things right.

As for Lazarus, he was the host and no doubt enjoyed this dinner party, but he might have felt a little nervous, too. After being the recipient of an astonishing miracle, the public was by then very aware of his close connection to Jesus. If there had been a press corps in those days, they would have been hovering outside his house trying to get the story, pestering the family and giving them no peace.

And yes, Judas Iscariot was among the guests, one of the twelve disciples and treasurer of the inner circle of followers. More about him later.

And then there was Mary. Mary was there, again sitting at the feet of Jesus, taking in his every word. Mary was not concerned with the preparation of the meal. She was concerned with spending time with her Lord who had brought back to life her dead brother, sensitive to the terrible price he would pay for that miracle.

And finally, Jesus was there as the guest of honor at this dinner party, daring to come out and dine in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, where the chief priests were even now plotting against him. For they were scared to death of this man who could raise the dead. He had to be stopped. The resuscitation of dead Lazarus prompted the chief priests to begin their plot against Jesus, and then Lazarus also.

What would you do if you knew that soon you were going to die? Would you gather your family and closest friends together so that you could spend time with them? If you hadn't already done so, you might plan your funeral, choosing which hymns you wanted sung, which scriptures read. Some people even plan what clothes they'll be buried in and what kind of flowers they want at the service. You might want to make sure your will is up-to-date. This lesson from John 12 is about the end of Jesus' earthly life—his final days. It's about an anointing of Jesus before his death and burial. The anointing of a king who will shortly ride into Jerusalem with crowds shouting, "Hosanna!" A king who will wash feet, serve, and triumph through death on the cross. A king whose kingdom is not of this world.

And at this dinner party, an event occurred that has never been forgotten because John recorded it so poignantly. Mary, the one who loved to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him, acted out her love and devotion in a way that has etched her name in the gospel account forever.

She broke open an alabaster jar of costly perfume and poured it, not on Jesus' head, but on his feet. Then she wiped his feet with her hair, in a striking gesture of love; as shortly, in that Upper Room Jesus will lovingly wash the feet of his disciples. But Jewish women didn't unbind their hair in public. Jewish women didn't pour perfume on a man's feet—his head, perhaps, to anoint him as a special guest, but not his feet. But Mary will enact the selfless discipleship that foot washing represents, while celebrating Jesus as specially anointed by God as he remains faithful, even to death on a cross.

Well, the costly gift of Mary immediately aroused the disapproval of Judas. How dare she waste such valuable perfume? It could have been sold and the money used to feed the poor, to buy more beds for the homeless shelter. (Besides Judas might have been able to pocket a little change for himself, too, as John views him not only a traitor, but also a thief.) How dare she! It was like placing all those poinsettias in the sanctuary at Christmas, or the lilies at Easter. It was like the gift of sterling communion ware, expensive audio equipment, the stained-glass windows, the flowers at the funeral. What a waste, with all the hungry people in the world. Likewise, a choir may spend hours rehearsing an intricate hymn, and three minutes later it is gone. The teacher works long and hard preparing the lesson, delivers it, and then the class is adjourned. But love has its reasons. Faith has its reasons. Commitment has its reasons.

To reflect on such generosity as Mary displays, can lead us to reflect on the gracious plenty Jesus provides: at Cana, 180 gallons of new wine are brought forth, more than the entire wedding party can consume; with just five loaves and two fish, over five thousand hungry people are fed by the Sea of Galilee, with twelve baskets of leftovers remaining; after fishing all night with no luck at all, Simon Peter is instructed by the risen Christ to cast his net on the other side of the boat. And when they do, they are unable to haul in the net because of the large number of fish.

Jesus came that we might have life, even abundant life. There is abundance wherever he is present. Mary is criticized for her generous anointing. Jesus says, "Leave her alone." Mary understands who Jesus is, what Jesus is going through, what is about to happen.

Now, we know that Jesus was especially concerned for the poor, often reminding the crowds to care for widows and orphans. But here Jesus doesn't agree with Judas in seeing Mary's act as a waste. He doesn't use this as an occasion to rise to the defense of the poor, to remind us that we should share what we have. He doesn't say here, "when you've done it to the least of these my brethren, you've done it unto me." For this night that just doesn't seem appropriate. "For everything there is a season," says the Proverb (3:1). This night was a night for anointing for what was about to happen at Calvary. This was a time for Mary to show her love for Jesus, with no concern for the social rules of the day, that said a woman's place is in the kitchen. Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone, for what she has done is important.

According to Biblical accounts, Mary didn't ever have much to say, but she spoke volumes with her actions. Perhaps she was spiritually discerning, because that night she seemed to have in her the same mind that was in Christ Jesus her Lord. She had sat at his feet on other occasions. Now Mary has somehow sensed that Jesus is about to die. She alone seems to have known what was on his mind and in his heart. Jesus told his disciples repeatedly that he must die, but they didn't seem to hear, they didn't seem to understand; and when the reality of the event presented itself, they ran away.

Mary is apparently the only one who thinks about what is about to happen, and expresses her feelings with this tender display of affection, as she anoints Jesus with a costly fragrance that is worth a year's wages. She offers this costly gift to honor her Lord at his approaching death. At this dinner party, she takes her place at the feet of Jesus, not only to listen to his words yet

again, but also to open her heart and anoint Jesus for his royal work. She gave her gift to Jesus while he was yet alive, with a generous spirit because she thought nothing too precious for her Lord and Savior.

My friends, Jesus is the priceless gift of God—God’s love, poured out for us. God’s own Son, full of grace and truth. The One who will lay down his life for us and our salvation. Surely it is appropriate that he be recognized and honored, by the offering of the best we have.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.