

Psalm 126
John 12:1-8

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 3, 2022

An Extravagant Anointing

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. Jerusalem has had a special relationship with God. It had served God and failed God. God's promises had been fulfilled and were still to be fulfilled. The psalm 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 the week of Passover, and thus serves as a reminder of the proximity to the time that "the hour will have come" for Jesus. Jesus is the guest of Lazarus, along with his sisters, Mary and Martha. Judas Iscariot is also there. 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 of turnip greens simmering on the stove or coffee perking can transport you to a place you'd long 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. Hazel and I can still recall visiting a church manse where the wonderful smell of baking bread filled the house. In our lesson in John 12, the smell of perfume fills the whole home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had recently brought back to life.

Now Bethany was only about a mile and a half from Jerusalem. Today you can see the city lights from this picturesque village overlooking the Mount of Olives.

Following the astonishing miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the public was very aware of the connection of Lazarus 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 Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha were there with their brother. 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.

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

And finally, Jesus was there as the guest of honor, 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 very alarmed about this man who could raise the dead. He had to be stopped. And so they began their plot against Jesus.

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!" Shortly there will be shouts of "Crucify him." A king who will wash feet, serve, and triumph through death on a 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, 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! 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. But Mary is criticized for her extravagant anointing. Jesus says, "Leave her alone." Mary understands who Jesus is, what Jesus is going through, what is about to happen.

Yes, 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 an extravagant 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, 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. It was okay for Mary to show her love and devotion, 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.

Recently I read the story of a young man while going to Seminary, was also serving as pastor of a little Baptist church in the country. Well, one day following Worship, a poor elderly lady came out of the service and put a silver dollar in the hand of the pastor's wife. But the wife refused the gift, not because she and her husband couldn't use it, but because she felt sorry for the old lady giving it.

Well, the incident was noticed by some other church members, and the couple was rebuked. For while the wife thought refusing the gift was logical and right, what the elderly woman was doing was in fact an act of love and devotion not to be refused. Like Mary's gracious act toward Jesus.

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 and listened to him on other occasions. Now Mary has sensed that Jesus is about to die. She alone seems to have known what was on his mind and in his heart. Jesus had 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 she expresses her feelings with this tender display of affection, as she anoints Jesus with a costly

fragrance that was worth a year's wages. 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.

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. The Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. Surely it is appropriate that he be recognized and honored, by our offering the best we have.

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