

**Sermon for Lent V Year C 2019**  
***Shumukh—“Deserving the Highest”***

Just out of curiosity, as I was preparing for this week’s sermon, I decided to find out what the most expensive perfume is today. It turns out that the world’s most expensive perfume is Shumukh— A perfume developed over the past three years but displayed and offered for sale for the first time just a few weeks ago in the Arab Emirate of Dubai.

Dubai is all about oil and luxury.

Until now, the world’s most expensive perfume had a price tag of \$205,000 per 500 ml bottle.

Now Dubai has launched Shumukh— which means “deserving the highest”— with a truly eye-popping price tag.

Before I tell you the price,

let me tell you a bit more about this extraordinary perfume.

The world’s most expensive perfume also holds several Guinness World Records including the most diamonds set on a perfume bottle, the tallest remote-controlled fragrance spray product (it adjusts to your height and dispenses just the right amount of perfume).

The bottle itself is made of hand-blown Murano glass and holds 3 liters of perfume inside it.

The case is encrusted with 3,571 sparkling diamonds, 2,479.26 grams of 18 carat gold, and 5,892.88 grams of pure silver,

not to mention other precious stones such as pearls and topaz.

Its clear that Shumukh takes extravagance to a whole new level.

The perfume creator actually set out to combine artistry, perfumery and fine jewelry.

How much would you imagine such a masterpiece would cost?

1.3 million dollars—that’s a lot of shekels and denarii.

At 1.3 million dollars,

more than 99% of the world’s population cannot afford it.

Now, I wonder what man or woman (it's a unisex perfume) will be the first to receive this magnificently costly perfume. Apparently there is a six-month wait to buy it since each bottle is made to order.

Something tells me I or anyone I know will ever receive a bottle, let alone get the chance to smell its aroma.

If you remember, the gospel of John begins with a story of divine extravagance for human enjoyment—the equivalence of 600 bottles of the best wine anyone ever tasted in Cana.

The evangelist, John, stated that Jesus' turning water into the best wine ever at the end of the wedding feast was the "first" of his signs.

This week as we turn towards Holy Week, the gospel of John offers another story of extravagance—that is a kind of bookend to the wedding of Cana.

Mary, the sister of Lazarus whom Jesus has raised from the dead, anoints Jesus with what could have been called the world's costliest perfume in Jesus' day—pure nard that was worth an entire year's wages.

The anointing of Jesus at Bethany is the last even in John's gospel before his "triumphal entry" and Jesus' passion—his self-giving suffering and death, his pouring himself out for the sake of the world.

You could say that from start to finish, life as a child of God is marked by excess and extravagance, both given and received.

This story of Mary is reminiscent of another woman of prolific generosity in the gospel, the poor widow who "gave all she had to live on" at the Temple.

That wasn't much money by human standards, of course, but Jesus said it was more than all that the rich gave combined.

But poor Judas—and perhaps most of us?—  
doesn't get it.

Judas is so focused on the cost of everything,  
he's lost sight of their value.

His self-proclaimed concern about providing for the poor,  
however, has little to do with his actual practice.

“Why in the world would anyone just ‘throw away’  
the equivalence of a year's wage . . .  
especially on an act of worship?”

But Mary of Bethany sees something more.

Mary has not lost sight of what is truly precious and rare.

Mary knows that

*Love and kindness are never wasted.*

*They always make a difference.*

*They bless the one who receives them,*

*and they bless you, the giver.*

To love or not to love.

That is a question inherent in today's gospel.

Actually, it is always the question.

For the past weeks in our mid-week Lenten evening prayer,  
we have been considering

what love has to do with anything and everything.

It seems that the hose to love or not to love is a question  
we face every minute of every day.

The answer to that question orients our way of being,  
guides how we live,

determines what we do,

even chooses the words we speak.

Ultimately, our answer reveals

whether our life is aligned with Jesus' life.

It's clear Mary answers the love question one way  
and Judas another.

In silence Mary anoints Jesus' feet and the extravagant fragrance fills the entire house.

Judas keeps to himself, questioning, criticizing, and scheming. Mary loves while Judas calculates.

Too often we understand love to simply be an emotion, a positive feeling, an attraction.

While that can be an aspect of love it is not, ultimately, what love is.

Whether or not we love does not finally depend on our emotions.

It depends on how we perceive the world.

It depends on how we look at or see others.

Despite the old saying, love is not blind.

Seeing and loving are always related.

It is, strangely enough, the emotions that can blind us and keep us from loving.

A fourth century monk named Evagrius said, “*Agape* (unconditional, perfect, divine love) is the child of *apatheia*.”

The Greek word *apatheia* does not mean apathy but freedom from the obsessions, compulsions, and the emotional agendas that often control and determine our life and choices.

*Agape*, love, is always born of freedom.

*Apatheia* is the difference between Mary and Judas.

Mary is free of the emotions.

The pouring out of her perfume is the pouring out of *agape*, love.

Judas, however, is filled with and possessed by the emotions.

John tells us that Judas is a betrayer, a thief, and despite what he says, cares nothing for the poor.

A myriad of emotions hides behind those descriptions:

self-interest and self-seeking, greed,

fear, anger, jealousy, indifference, disappoint, regret.

Whatever it is that grips Judas, he is blind and unable to love—

And, perhaps it keeps him from receiving love as well.

How we see, how we perceive, determines whether and how we love.  
Seeing deeply and truthfully,  
penetrating below the surface, enables love.  
Look at the world.

If you see beauty, the wonder of creation,  
and the manifestation of God's self, you will love.  
If you simply see physical matter, impersonal stuff, or material objects,  
chances are you will not love the world.

Look at a stranger.

If all you see is another nameless,  
faceless individual in the crowd of life,  
you will likely not love.

If, however, you see a unique person,  
one created in the image and likeness of God,  
a brother or sister cherished by the same God who cherishes you,  
one for whom Christ died,  
you will know yourself to be one who loves.

The seeing that leads to love  
does not happen with the physical eyes  
but with the eyes of the heart—  
the deepest and innermost part of our self—  
the eyes of faith at the very center of our being.  
Mary's heart has been awakened and sees what Judas cannot.  
Judas' heart is asleep.  
He is unable to see what Mary sees.  
Mary sees the Way, the Truth, and the Life.  
Judas sees opportunity and profits.  
Mary pours out all that she is and all that she has.  
She holds back nothing.  
Judas only wants to take and keep for himself.

How can this be?  
Mary and Judas are in the same house,  
eating the same dinner,  
with the same people.  
They are both in the presence of Jesus  
and yet they see two very different realities  
that draw from them two very different responses.

This points to the truth that the ancient monk spoke.  
Our emotional agendas distort reality.  
We see the world not so much as it is, but as we are.  
What we see and how we love,  
in many ways,  
say more about us than about the object of our seeing and loving.

That is what this season of Lent has been about.  
It is a season of learning to love.  
The question of love has been the unspoken question  
in each of the Sunday gospels throughout this Lent.  
the temptation in the wilderness,  
Jesus' lament over Jerusalem,  
his prophetic call that unless we repent we will perish,  
the father with two sons.  
Every one of those gospel lessons is about  
the reorientation of our life to be and become  
one who loves God and others.  
That reorientation to become one who loves,  
the choice to love or not to love,  
is made explicit in the Mary and Judas.

As easy and tempting as it may be,  
we do ourselves no favor by condemning and dismissing Judas.  
Jesus didn't, so why would we?  
The condemnation and dismissal of Judas  
is the condemnation and dismissal of ourselves.

Judas is as much a part of us as is Mary.  
Mary and Judas are both parts of each of us.  
Both live within us.  
Both teach us something about ourselves.  
Sometimes we are Mary and sometimes we are Judas.

Each of us could name times when our own “stuff,”  
our baggage and emotional agendas, got in the way of choosing to love,  
choosing the good of the other.  
They are times of regret and disappointment,  
times when our heart was asleep,  
and we were less than we wanted to be.  
We could also tell about those times when we bypassed efficiency and  
practicality, ignored what seemed to make sense,  
when we didn’t settle for just doing or saying the right thing,  
but choose instead to pour ourselves out on the life of another.  
We saw a greater need and deeper reality.  
We held back nothing.  
Our heart was awakened and we fragranced the entire world.

Those experiences of Mary and Judas teach us about ourselves  
and the choices we have made.  
They remind us that wherever we go, whoever we are with,  
whatever we are doing, there is a choice to be made.

Jesus said, “She did what she could.”  
And that’s what we can do in our lives.  
We do what we can.  
Mary’s anointing didn’t save  
Jesus from suffering and death he would endure.  
Nor will our faithful discipleship solve every problem.

But with Mary we do what we can  
in loving response to God's infinite goodness,  
in the costly love of God in Christ—  
the self-giving love of God in Christ  
is an extravagant and priceless gift—  
that love is *shumukh*—"deserving the highest" praise—  
especially since this costly, precious love  
is not offered just to the 1%,  
it's given freely to every one of us.

Mary saw this and she responded.  
She did what she could.  
Now you and I are invited to go and do all that we can too.

And keep in mind:  
*Love and kindness are never wasted.*  
*They always make a difference.*  
*They bless the one who receives them,*  
*and they bless you, the giver.*