

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year C)

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*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.'*

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Jesus must have known that his death was approaching. He must have had a feeling deep down in his gut that whatever God was ultimately calling him to do was fast approaching.

He had made his fair share of enemies. So far in his tumultuous ministry, he had already added more than a few controversial items to his resumé including (but not limited to) overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, healing people on the sabbath, and defending a woman caught in adultery.

The tension was building. The animosity garnered by his challenging of the status quo was coming to a breaking point. And Jesus knew it. He knew "his hour" was getting close. He needed a little rest because of what was behind him and what he knew was before him.

It had been a long week. Just a few days before, Jesus had heard of some rather disturbing news: Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was seriously ill. Not a little head cold, but the type of illness that threatens with death. The threat took over and Lazarus died. He was dead for four days before Jesus could get there, and the scene he found when he got there was traumatic.

Weeping, crying, wailing like you've never heard before. Mary literally fell at Jesus' feet, calling him Lord, and blaming him for her brother's death. "He wouldn't have died if you'd been here!" she yelled between sobs. Jesus was moved. So moved that he wept with the rest of them.

Then he yelled at them to take away the stone and they obeyed, though they were weary of the stench that surely was to follow. And then out came a bewildered Lazarus, definitely alive. He had been raised by the Son of God, the very Messiah that had failed to save him in the first place but saved him ultimately, nevertheless.

And so, it had definitely been a long, exhausting week. Jesus needed some sabbath. He needed some time with dear friends. Some time to relax and refresh before the difficult times ahead that you and I will remember in the coming weeks. Therefore, Jesus decided to invite himself to a dinner party.

It was an odd gathering for a dinner party. Jesus, Judas, and three siblings - Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (that's right, the very same Lazarus that had been dead only a few days prior).

It is curious that Lazarus is the most silent of the party. You would think that he would have a lot to say after being raised from the dead. Instead, he remains mute throughout today's narrative. And, no matter really, because Mary has something far more important to say.

Only she doesn't do so with words. Sometimes the most powerful statements are the ones enacted rather than spoken.

Before, after, or during dinner (the text doesn't tell us which), Mary, without a word, gets up and leaves the room and comes back with an expensive jar of perfume. How expensive? Three hundred denarii, which is, conservatively, at least \$6,000 in today's currency.

She sets herself at Jesus' feet and breaks the bottle open with a large crack. The aroma quickly fills the small room and everyone inhales the beautiful scent.

Lovingly and carefully, Mary lavishes the perfume onto Jesus' feet. Both the type of perfume that she uses and the method she uses to apply it suggest that Mary is preparing Jesus' body for burial. Mary, it seems, is aware that the price that was paid for her brother's resuscitation was that is put the ultimate price on Jesus' head. The fact that Jesus had brought her brother, Lazarus, back to life meant that Jesus' death was now an imminent reality. And her worshipful act of anointing Jesus' feet embodied that reality.

You see, the reality of Jesus' death was not something that was easily accepted by his closest followers. Time and time again in John's gospel, Jesus tries to explain to his followers that he must die and rise again. However, they close their ears to that truth, choosing not to accept that their beloved Teacher must die. Today's act by Mary tells us that she has accepted this truth in a way that so many others could not.

Mary breaks open the jar of perfume and lavishes it upon the most precious thing in the room, perhaps the most precious thing to her in the world - her Lord and Savior. Mary had an understanding that Jesus' time among them was limited. She understood that the life of her brother came at the cost of the death of her savior.

Taking all of these things into account, this act is loving and bitter sweet. Was it too much? Was it too extravagant? Was it over the top?

These questions didn't even enter Mary's mind. Mary was a prophet. And prophets have messages that must be relayed no matter the cost.

This Prophet Mary knew that these feet she was now anointing still had much walking left to do. And yet, she knew the direction that they were heading in with much more particularity than anyone else.

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to walk to a colt and enter the streets of Jerusalem to a cheering crowd shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to walk to an upper room where he would break bread with his disciples.

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to take him to the garden of Gethsemane, where he would be handed over to those that would call for him to be crucified.

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to take him before Pontius Pilate.

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to take him to the hill of Golgotha, carrying that heavy cross.

Mary knew that the feet of Jesus were about to be nailed to that very cross.

And so, was that perfume wasted? Absolutely not.

Yes, Mary was a prophet, indeed. At this dinner party, she enacted in the flesh what everyone was scared to admit in their very minds.

I wonder what Jesus thought while Mary was anointing his feet. I like to think that he was comforted by knowing that at least one other person understood what was about to happen. Perhaps that's why he defended her so when Judas criticized her gracious act. Perhaps that's why Jesus came to this dinner party in the first place - because he knew that he needed to be anointed before moving forward towards his death.

Mary was no less a disciple than the other 12 men who claimed that title. She embodied discipleship in a way that we would all do well to emulate. How is God calling us to extravagant acts of discipleship?

Even a small church such as ours is called to embody the extravagance of Mary's loving act. Looking around at you today, I see so many extravagant jars of perfume waiting to be cracked open and to be lavished among those who need it most. What is the extravagant jar of perfume that God has gifted you with that you are being called to share? How are you being called to join Mary in anointing Jesus?

As we approach Palm Sunday, take this week to ponder the ways in which you are being called to accompany Jesus to the cross. If you're like me, you don't literally have a \$6,000 bottle of perfume to lavish on anyone's feet. However, you very likely have a gift of the Spirit that is worth much more than that.

Friends, Jesus is with us only a little while longer. Mary knew that and so should we. Our Lord and Savior is preparing for his death and so should we. What extravagant acts can we do to prepare ourselves for the path ahead? I remind you that this is an excellent time of the year to take a few hours and read one of the four Gospels from start to finish or, if you're adventurous enough, to read all four gospels in the next two weeks. Reminds yourself of the stories that we will be telling over the next two weeks. Spend time with Jesus this way, like Mary did, knowing that her Lord and Savior was headed to that dreadful cross.